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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MUSCAT 000590

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TAGS: [AMER](#) [AMGT](#) [ASEC](#) [CASC](#) [KSAC](#) [KHLS](#) [MOPS](#) [SENV](#) [MU](#)

SUBJECT: OMAN BEGINS CYCLONE RECOVERY EFFORTS, CONTINUES TO ASSESS DAMAGE

REF: A. MUSCAT 581

[B](#). MUSCAT 576

[C](#). MUSCAT 574

Classified By: Ambassador Gary A. Grappo for Reasons 1.4 (b, d)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Major clean-up and recovery efforts are underway in the Muscat area following the pounding the city took from tropical cyclone Gonu, but significant work remains to be done. Some parts of the greater capital area still have no power or water and the damaged road system is snarled with traffic. Standing water presents a potential health hazard and some residents have reported looting in temporarily abandoned homes. Road crews are working to restore transportation links with towns outside Muscat previously cut-off by the storm, but water, food and other supplies in more isolated areas remain scarce. The city of Sur further south along the Omani coast suffered an even more direct hit from Gonu, but is being aided by a large-scale Omani military assistance operation. But, perhaps the biggest question Omanis are asking five days after the storm is, "Where's the Sultan?" Reported to be actively inspecting the damage and recovery efforts, he has not been seen or heard from. End Summary.

MUSCAT: ATTEMPTING TO RESTORE THE CITY'S SHEEN

[1](#)2. (U) In the aftermath of the destruction caused by tropical cyclone Gonu (refs A-C), the government of Oman has initiated extensive relief and clean-up efforts in affected areas. In the Muscat metropolitan area, widely known for its beauty, organization and almost antiseptic cleanliness, destruction, garbage and in a few places even chaos now reign. Road repair crews are working extended hours to re-open traffic arteries by removing mud, fallen trees and debris from streets and, in some cases, by making temporary structural repairs. Electricity service is being restored to additional neighborhoods, although an announcement in the local press June 11 asked city residents to "conserve" power. Of more concern to most people, the city water supply and distribution system is slowly reaching more parts of the city as the desalination plants in Ghubra and Barka move towards normal capacity, although full production and operations may not be restored for another week. (Note: The residences of all U.S. employees of the Embassy have electricity and have

also received sufficient water -- either from delivery trucks or through distribution pipes -- to meet immediate needs. End Note.) In some areas that were spared major flooding, daily life is deceptively "normal" with open stores and supermarkets full of consumer goods (although there is still a shortage of fresh milk and other items) and readily available gasoline at service stations.

OMANIS HELPING EACH OTHER

13. (SBU) Apart from government efforts, Omanis continue to make material donations to aid storm victims and are actively volunteering to assist in clean-up and relief operations (ref A). The local press, for example, contains numerous articles focusing on the generosity of the Omani people and how Omanis (not expatriates) have rallied together to assist others. Despite a government policy banning assistance from non-Omanis (ref A), local charities are now accepting donated goods (though not cash) from foreign residents and utilizing expatriate volunteers. Westerners helping to accept donations report considerable disorganization as volunteers and charity officials attempt to sort and deliver items to affected areas. (Note: Some well-intentioned individuals have donated cooked food or other highly perishable goods. End Note.) Interestingly, one U.S. national volunteer observed several non-related Omani men and women ignoring cultural norms by working together side-by-side. Some of the women had discarded their traditional abayas, while some of the men had taken off their dishdash in favor of T-shirts and athletic garb (even shorts!).

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WATER SHORTAGES, LOOTING HINDER RECOVERY

14. (SBU) Despite the progress noted above, major challenges to storm recovery efforts in and around the Muscat area remain. While an increasing number of city neighborhoods have power and at least limited water service, some areas of metropolitan Muscat -- particularly those that experienced major flooding and/or are near "wadis" that overflowed during the cyclone -- still have no electrical service or water. With temperatures back to their oppressive summer levels, many residents of these areas have not been able to live in their homes. Moreover, some contacts have related stories of organized looting of temporarily abandoned homes, leading some homeowners to have at least one family member stand guard over their possessions until their homes are once again habitable.

FEW HEALTH CONCERNS FOR THE MOMENT

15. (SBU) Although flood waters from the storm receded fairly quickly, stagnant pools of standing water - some quite large - remain in several parts of the city. Authorities are attempting to pump the water out, but progress is slow and the water could potentially flood the sewer system, seep into city water pipes (thereby contaminating municipal water supplies), and serve as a breeding ground for insects and disease. Local press on June 11 confirmed widespread cases of diarrhea in the city, but the Ministry of Health stated that it does not expect "a pandemic outbreak." Post has learned that hospitals are taking in significant numbers of children with dysentery and other intestinal problems as a result of drinking unclean water.

RESTORING TRANSPORTATION A CHALLENGE

¶6. (SBU) Many stretches of road in the Muscat region that were completely washed out by the cyclone - as well as numerous collapsed bridges - will require considerable time, in some cases months, to be rebuilt and reopen. The current closure of these roads and bridges has already caused huge traffic jams in Muscat as more and more residents attempt to return to their jobs and venture out onto the roads to conduct normal tasks. Traffic problems are further exacerbated by shocking numbers of rubberneckers, some coming from as far as the UAE, to see the havoc wrought by Gonu.

¶7. (SBU) Farther afield, some coastal towns on the outskirts of Muscat, including Qurayat and Amirat, were almost completely cut-off for several days after the storm by damaged roads and reachable only by 4-wheel drive. Contacts report that a few vehicles delivering aid to some of these towns have been vandalized by mobs of residents desperate for food, water and other necessities. Road crews have since opened a narrow passage to Qurayat and Amirat (quickly overwhelmed by traffic), but supplies there and in other more isolated areas are still very limited.

STORM'S HUMAN TOLL STILL UNKNOWN

¶8. (SBU) While the official death toll remains at 49, one Royal Oman Police (ROP) contact told poloff that he expects that number will exceed 100 as more information comes in from areas outside Muscat. A physician at Royal Hospital (located near hard-hit neighborhoods in western Muscat) reported that the number of storm-related injuries appeared to be relatively low, and that his hospital's emergency room handled 57 patients on June 7, 15 of whom had injuries directly related to Gonu. On June 8, he added, the number of such injuries dropped to seven.

HEAVY DAMAGE IN SUR

¶9. (SBU) While reports and observations of damage were relatively quick to come in from Muscat, the situation in the city of Sur - about 170 kilometers down the Omani coast - has until very recently remained unclear. Rumors abounded that

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Sur and surrounding villages, which were hardest hit during the evening of June 5 (many hours before Muscat), had been severely damaged. (Note: The industrial port city of Sohar north of Muscat appears to have sustained less damage and flooding than the capital as it was farther removed from the eye of the cyclone. End Note.) All principal roads leading to Sur were completely washed out during the storm and no telephone calls (via cell phones or land lines) were able to reach the city for several days afterwards. According to early government reports, the Omani military launched an emergency relief operation via sea to provide assistance to beleaguered residents of the area.

¶10. (C) On June 10, two teams of U.S. military members currently in Oman for training with the Omani armed forces attempted to reach Sur from Muscat via 4-wheel drive vehicles on two different routes -- one through roads in the Omani interior, the other along coastal roads. The team taking the coastal route observed, but was able to get around, several washed out roadways and bridges before turning back at the town of Tiwi approximately 28 miles north of Sur due to a destroyed land bridge. (Note: The team saw a road construction crew actively working to construct a new bridge. End Note.) They noted intact cell phone transmitter towers along the way, but no cell phone coverage was available. The team taking the inland route was able to reach Sur approximately 3.5 hours after departing Muscat, although they observed several stretches of washed out road and a destroyed bridge that they were able to bypass. The team passed

several Omani military trucks carrying water, diapers, mattresses, blankets and other supplies on their journey, and reported that the cell phone network was operational along the entire route.

¶11. (C) According to the U.S. military teams, Sur remains without power and water, although cell phone coverage in the city has been restored. The Omani army post outside of Sur appeared fully intact and was busy with activity, including multiple helicopters taking off and landing. City streets were full of mud, and residents reported that a tidal surge and flooding wadis had submerged some city buildings and knocked down walls and other structures. Strong winds, they continued, had blown out many windows and sheared the tops off of palm trees. Most buildings, however, appeared structurally intact, as did the large liquefied natural gas (LNG) facility. The team spoke with three U.S. citizens (whose names were provided by the Embassy consular section), who reported that all known Americans were in good condition.

One Amcit noted that he was "impressed" by the way the Omani military had quickly flown and shipped in supplies after the cyclone. Other residents also expressed relative satisfaction with relief and clean-up efforts, although items other than basic necessities were in short supply and gasoline was being strictly rationed. It is unknown how much assistance has been able to reach villages outside of Sur in this hard-hit region.

COMMENT: WHERE'S THE SULTAN?

¶12. (C) The Omani government appears to be doing a credible job in recovering from the immediate impact of tropical cyclone Gonu. Its resources, however, are limited and pressing needs, as described above, will likely remain for some time. Long-term, the country will require a huge investment to rebuild destroyed or damaged infrastructure and public facilities. In addition to telling stories of destruction and hardship, many people in Oman are quietly (and in some instances, not so quietly) asking, "Where is the Sultan?" The Sultan's absence from public and the lack of official statements from the palace or from the cabinet during and after the storm are puzzling even to senior Omani officials and could affect the popularity and admiration the Sultan has long enjoyed from both Omanis and expatriates. Others are questioning the continuing decision not to accept the many offers of foreign assistance (ref A), including from the U.S., UK, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and others. End Comment.

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